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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002838

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SUBJECT: VP ABDEL MEHDI TO CODEL VOINOVICH: PATIENCE, PLEASE

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi told CODEL Voinovich (Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH), Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) and Sen. David Vitter (R-LA)) August 20 that an improved security environment and a change in the Sunni "mood" indicate that Iraq is making slow but significant progress. In reply to repeated questions about the Iraqi Government's inability to effect political reconciliation, Abdel Mehdi conceded limited progress but cited recent senior-level agreement on the broad outlines of de-Ba'athification, amnesty, and detainee release, as well as major private sector investment in mobile telephone infrastructure as grounds for optimism. The VP stated that Iraq has a "Sunni problem" that requires a "Shi'a solution" through Shi'a accommodation of Sunni fears and frustrations resulting from a loss of political dominance, and that he and President Talibani are working together to develop trust between Prime Minister al-Maliki and Vice President al-Hashemi. He said he shared USG concerns about malign Iranian influence in Iraq, stating that the Iran-linked Mahdi Army (JAM) was "probably" behind the recent assassinations of two southern provincial governors. He claimed that JAM's spiritual leader Muqtada al-Sadr has "only 3 percent" of the influence wielded by supreme Shi'a prelate Ali al-Sistani among Iraq's majority Shi'a population. A recurring meeting theme was expression of Senatorial impatience with GOI political progress met with Abdel Mehdi's plea for greater patience: Senator Voinovich closed the meeting by imploring the GOI to come through with a "dramatic" political achievement to ensure status quo USG support, while Abdel Mehdi asked the USG to not "throw away your past sacrifices" through a precipitate change in policy. End Summary.

Sunni Problem, Shi'a Solution  
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¶2. (C) In a 45-minute meeting with CODEL Voinovich, Vice President Abdel Mehdi stated that the last few months had seen a "shift in Iraq's situation" that went to the "root" of its core problem: Sunni fears and frustrations, "whether valid or not valid," caused by a loss of political dominance. He cited the willingness of Sunni leaders in Anbar province, "where all the trouble started," to battle al-Qaeda as evidence of that shift, and attributed a change in Sunni "mood" to "exhaustion" and a realization by Sunni leaders that they had run out of options. Using Northern Ireland as an analogy, he averred that insurgencies end when insurgents, even if not thoroughly defeated, realize they can not achieve their aims through violent means. Abdel Mehdi said he detected a changed mood among Iraqis in general, stating that "in 2003 we were totally optimistic and in 2006 we were totally pessimistic, now we are exhausted and more realistic." The 59 year-old Shi'a politician stated that Iraq's "Sunni problem" requires a "Shi'a solution" through greater Shi'a understanding and accommodation of Sunni fears

"even though the fears might not be just" but provided no details beyond "good governance" and better education.

¶3. (C) Abdel Mehdi said that while he and President Talibani were working hard to overcome mutual mistrust between Sunni VP al-Hashemi and PM Maliki, the concept of power sharing had limits "because there can only be two or three top positions." He identified lack of trust as a real problem among Iraqi politicians, but not within ordinary Iraqi society. As a measure of Iraq's growing political maturity, he pointed to the contrast between the GOI's inability to restrain retaliatory sectarian violence after the February 2006 bombing of Samara's al-Askari Mosque, and the GOI's far more competent handling of the aftermath of a repeat bombing of the mosque several months ago that resulted in relatively little sectarian mayhem. He also pointed to private sector investment of USD 1.25 billion in Iraq's mobile telephone industry as evidence that Iraq is moving forward, as it indicates investor confidence in Iraq's future. VP Senior Advisor Fareed Yasseen chimed in that while the western media never tires of stories about Iraq's problems, it pays scant attention to Iraqi successes such as the stability of the Iraqi Dinar, which he claimed has appreciated against the U.S. dollar due to prudent GOI fiscal and budgetary policy.

¶4. (C) In reply to repeated questions and expressions of American exasperation over the Iraqi Government's inability to achieve political reconciliation, Abdel Mehdi conceded limited progress but cited recent agreement Iraq's top leaders on the broad outlines of de-Ba'athification, amnesty, and detainee release. On several occasions he cautioned that political reconciliation and Iraq's "radical" transformation from dictatorship to democracy will take time: to drive home

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his point, he half-jokingly surmised that there may be some people in Tennessee, the home state of Senators Alexander and Corker, who have yet to be reconciled to the outcome of the American Civil War. He insisted that the Iraqi Government should not be held responsible for all of Iraq's problems, citing al-Qaeda as "an international problem" and complaining of support by Iraq's neighbors for malign internal elements. For example, he listed Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as sources of support or foreign fighters for internal Iraqi violence, and stated that visiting French Foreign Minister Kouchner told him France had detained 42 fighters who were headed to Iraq. He also stated that the Iraqi Government was fearful that its efforts could "backfire" if it acted too hastily. Abdel Mehdi opined that Iraq's enemies believe the Iraqi and American governments are "nervous and want to force us into making mistakes." A recurring meeting theme was expression of Senatorial impatience met with Abdel Mehdi's plea for greater patience: Senator Voinovich stated the GOI badly needs a "dramatic" political achievement to ensure status quo USG support, while Abdel Mehdi asked the USG to not "throw away your past sacrifices" through a precipitate change in policy.

Iran, al-Sadr, al-Sistani  
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¶5. (C) Abdel Mehdi said he shares American concerns regarding Iranian activity in Iraq, adding that the recent assassinations of two provincial governors from Iraq's southern Shi'a belt (both of whom were affiliated with Abdel Mehdi's ISCI/Badr political movement) were "probably" perpetrated by the Mahdi Army (JAM). He stated that Iran was exploiting some Iraqi Shi'a elements, but declined to express an opinion on the extent of Iranian influence over Muqtada al-Sadr, JAM's spiritual leader. Recounting an anecdote about recent mortar attacks on Baghdad's International Zone (where Abdel Mehdi lives and works), he stated that an Iranian official told him Iran had pressured al-Sadr followers to cease such attacks: Abdel Mehdi said with a chuckle that the official's statement unwittingly revealed

Iranian complicity in the attacks. He claimed that al-Sadr has "only 3 percent" of the influence and public prestige held by Iraq's supreme Shi'a prelate Ali al-Sistani among Iraq's majority Shi'a population, and he hailed al-Sistani's efforts to counsel Shi'a calm and peace in the wake of repeated provocative violence by Sunnis. Senator Voinovich asked him to pass a message of thanks to al-Sistani.

16. (U) CODEL Voinovich did not have an opportunity to review this message.

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